
The Struggle Over Moving The General Conference

by Beverly Habada and Roy Branson

Denominational and civic leaders officially broke ground September 1, 1987, for the new world headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist church. March 1989 is the target date for moving into the new building, located 15 minutes driving time into the Maryland suburbs from the present General Conference complex in Takoma Park, Maryland, on the edge of Washington, D.C.

The story behind the relocation reveals how groups within the Adventist community use different methods to check and balance one another; critically, in this case, different ways of relating to a third-party government. Local Adventist leaders feel that their direct contacts with county officials, despite the advice of denominational officials that they not become involved, helped the church headquarters to remain in the Washington metropolitan area.

The new building, located along the Route 29 corridor (see map), will have 300,000 square feet compared to the 187,000 square feet in the six buildings on the present General Conference headquarters, and the 211,000 square feet in the previous Review and Herald Publishing Association building.

The overall cost for replacing the building complex in Washington, D.C., will come to at least \$39,163,840. Of that total \$24,325,000 will

be spent just to build the new General Conference headquarters. Other costs include the \$13,463,840 the Review and Herald Publishing Association spent to replace their previous plant adjacent to the General Conference, \$675,000 in required traffic reduction costs and road and parking space improvements at the new site, and \$700,000 to be paid in lease-back costs to the buyer of the General Conference headquarters. When the \$14 million gained from sale of the present site is subtracted from the overall cost, the price tag for building new headquarters for the General Conference and Review and Herald Publishing Association comes to \$25,163,840.

The story began 18 years ago when the General Conference strenuously debated whether or not the General Conference headquarters should be moved out of its present site. Neal Wilson, then vice-president of the General Conference for North America, led those strongly urging relocation of the General Conference outside Washington, D.C. He opposed the decision that prevailed—erecting the 10-floor high-rise office building that dominates the present General Conference complex. Wilson successfully convinced the General Conference officers to purchase 30 acres of farmland in Montgomery County on Route 29 for less than \$1 million.

The President Begins the Move

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Wilson became president of the General Conference in 1978. Within two years he assumed the chairmanship of

the Review and Herald Publishing Association board and led its constituency in approving relocation out of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. At that 1980 constituency meeting an associate treasurer of the General Conference, Robert Osborn, predicted that if the publishing association moved, its 211,000 square foot building could not be leased or sold independently of the adjacent General Conference buildings. Consequently, financial pressure would lead to disposal of the whole General Conference headquarters complex. Therefore, he said, moving the publishing association would have a domino effect on the General Conference and other Adventist institu-

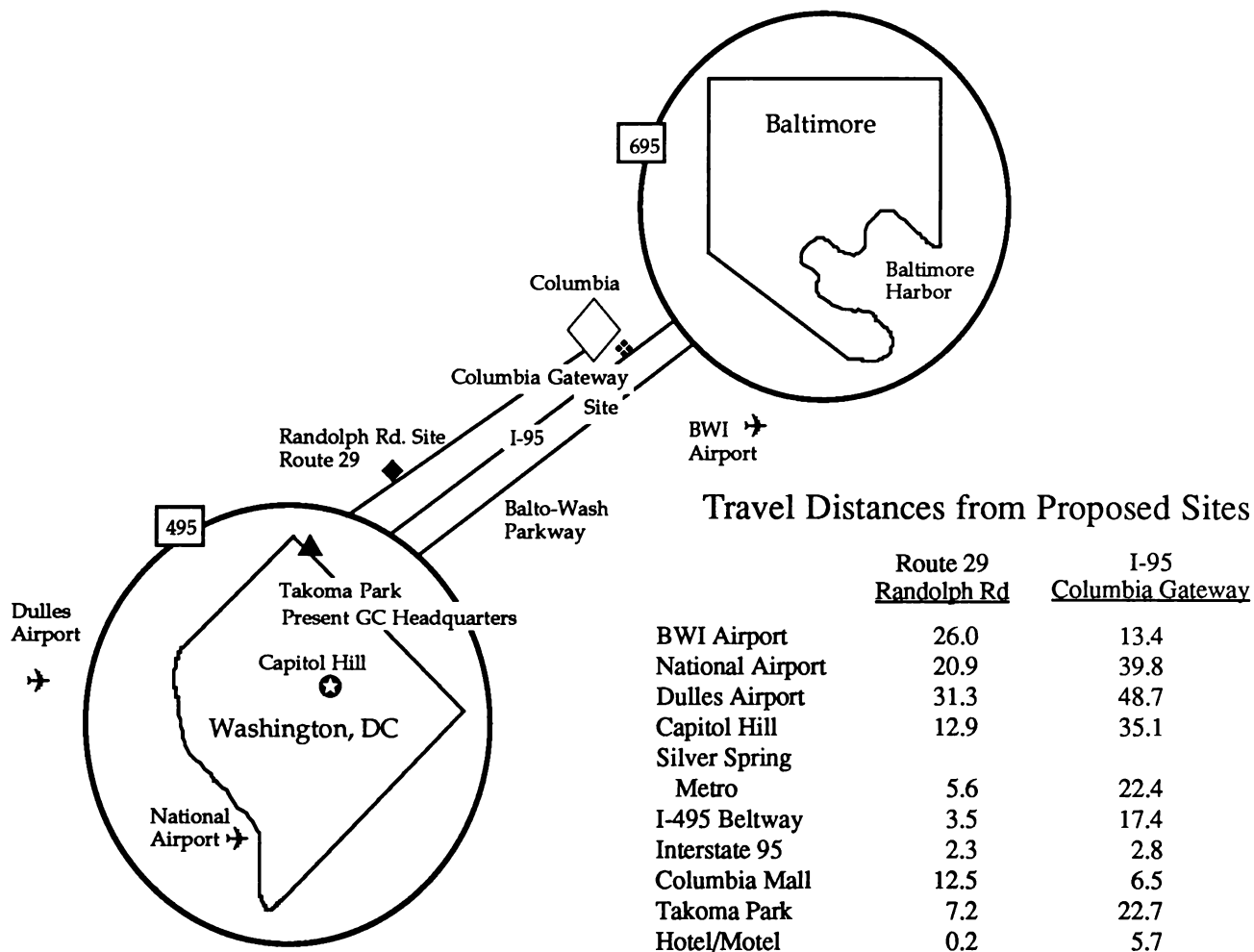
tions in the metropolitan area, including the Takoma Park and Sligo Adventist churches.

Indeed, the *Adventist Review* now pinpoints this moment as decisive. "The die was cast in 1980, when the Review and Herald Publishing Association constituency voted to move the publishing house. If the church made a mistake, it was then. The publishing house relocated in Hagerstown during 1982-1983, leaving empty the cavernous old Review building right next to the central GC building."¹

Toward the end of that 1980 constituency meeting, the chairman, Neal Wilson, acknowledged that he did think it might be better for the

Locating the General Conference Headquarters

(Map not to scale)



General Conference to be located outside Washington, D.C. However, he said, the leadership of the church was not spending all its waking moments devising ways to accomplish such a move.²

At the very next (1981) Annual Council, church leadership discussed moving out of Washington, D.C., and the buildings were soon put up for sale. In 1982 the General Conference officers turned down an offer of \$11.9 million because they wanted to sell for the same amount they projected a new headquarters would cost—\$15 million. The move, leadership said, would not cost the denomination any new appropriations.³

By 1983 leadership was preparing the Annual Council for the possibility that the sales price of the present complex would not be sufficient to pay for construction of the new building. Walter Blehm, then president of the Pacific Union, and others, urged that no appropriations be made until documentation demonstrated space needs and reliable building costs. But the Annual Council proceeded to approve spending up to \$6 million beyond the sales price of the present site.⁴

That same year the Review and Herald Publishing Association moved into their \$13,463,840 plant and offices in Hagerstown. Without income from sale of the Takoma Park property, the debt

General Conference Commitments on Transportation

The agreement between Montgomery County and the General Conference approved in April specifies more than a dozen measures to be taken by the church and the county to mitigate the impact of the projected 443 vehicle trips that would be generated during rush hours because of the development along the Route 29 corridor. The more significant elements of the agreement include:

1. Montgomery County will provide reverse flow bus service from the Silver Spring Metro Station to Route 29, using available capacity on existing buses. Bus service will be provided for Adventists traveling from their homes in Takoma Park and Silver Spring to the new site as well as service for the general public.

2. Montgomery County will build a 200-space Park 'N Ride commuter parking lot in the Route 29 corridor to encourage transit use and ride-sharing use.

3. The church will operate a transit encouragement program, including participation in reduced-rate transit bus passes subsidized by the church.

4. The church will pay an estimated \$1.5 million for road improvements and Park 'N Ride lots, including a 155-space public lot to be built on the 30-acre site and 150 spaces to be built elsewhere along the corridor.

5. The church will operate a ride-share program with a full-time Adventist employee designated as transportation coordinator spending at least half his or her time on promotion of van-pooling and other ride-sharing programs.

6. The church will provide reserved parking spaces close to the new building(s) as an incentive to employees who car/van pool.

7. The church will adjust its official working hours by 15 minutes (from 8:00 a.m. to 8:15 a.m.) or initiate flextime to avoid the highest peak traffic hours on Route 29.

service on the new facilities remained high, creating further pressure on the General Conference to sell. No one seems to have urged expanding the General Conference facilities by remodeling the old Review and Herald building or razing it and constructing a new facility for the General Conference on that site.

Finally, in 1985 negotiations were completed to sell the 10 plus acres of the General Conference and Review and Herald property in Takoma Park to the Development Group of Laurel, Maryland, for a reported price of \$14 million. The sales

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agreement provided for the new owners to occupy the Review and Herald building November 1, 1985, and to lease back to the General Conference its other buildings until March 1988, when the new General Conference headquarters was expected to be ready.

However, the present site was sold before a building permit had actually been obtained for constructing the new headquarters at the Route 29 site. Several unanticipated events ensued. One was the loss of \$1 million in rent to the new owners because the General Conference had to remain in its buildings beyond its anticipated departure. Another unexpected result was an opening of the decision-making process within the denomination. Still another outcome was greater appreciation by both church leaders and governmental planners of the complexity of each other's structure.

General Conference officials seem to have realized only after sale of their headquarters how significant it was that three major governmental players had to be satisfied before the General Conference could build and move into a new

headquarters: the county executive, the county council, and the county planning board.

The county executive, Charles Gilchrist, was positive about the headquarters project. He encouraged Neal Wilson, and Charles Frederick, coordinator of the General Conference building project, to proceed with plans to build on the denomination's 30 acres of property along the Route 29 corridor.

However, the county executive at that time did not play a significant part in the county land use planning process. The Montgomery County council was the body to act on zoning matters. What had been farmland when it had been bought 18 years ago was now a developing corridor of headquarters buildings, such as the huge Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company complex. First, the denomination's property had to be rezoned from land on which single family residences could be built, to a site where a moderate intensity office building could be erected. The General Conference applied to the county council in May 1985, but sold their Takoma Park property before receiving county council approval of their rezoning application.

The church had not anticipated the importance of a major debate within Montgomery County dividing the county executive and the majority on the county council on growth management in the county. The county executive favored development and growth. The council majority wanted to restrain growth. Indeed, Gilchrist and the council were often at odds on many other matters as well. It was not until more than three months after the new owners of the General Conference complex had already started moving into the old Review and Herald Publishing Association building, that the county council approved the zoning application for the General Conference that would allow for building yet another office building in Montgomery County.

The General Conference had initiated discussion with the third relevant governmental entity, the Montgomery County planning board, before selling its old headquarters. In 1984 the General Conference had filed its subdivision application,

but went ahead and sold its Takoma Park property before obtaining approval for starting its proposed complex on Route 29. Members of the county planning board are appointed by the county council and are charged with the responsibility of review and approval of what is called preliminary subdivision and site plans. In compliance with Adequate Public Facilities laws enacted by the county council, the planning board insisted on plans showing adequate facilities and arrangements for transporting the increased number of employees coming into the already burgeoning area where the General Conference expected to build.

The first public hearing on the General Conference's subdivision application and proposed site plan did not take place until May 1986, more than six months after the new owners began moving into the old Review and Herald building. And at that meeting the planning board did not give its approval, deferring action until the church provided more adequate plans for not adding to the already overcrowded traffic patterns in the Route 29 corridor. The price tag for all the parking sites and road improvements the planning board seemed to require shocked the church—\$1 million.

To complicate matters further, Charles Gilchrist, who had been supportive of the General Conference, announced that he would not run for reelection in 1986; he was retiring from politics to become an Episcopal priest, which left an important vacuum in the political process. During the primary season Wilson met once with front-runner Sidney Kramer, who eventually was elected in the fall to succeed Gilchrist. But Wilson was clearly frustrated by the nearly two years of negotiations over site approval in Montgomery County, and did not meet with Kramer after his election. Wilson quietly began considering sites considerably farther away in Maryland.

The Pastor Speaks Out

Adventist members in the Washington metropolitan area did not real-

ize that the General Conference might move to the vicinity of Baltimore or beyond until the new senior pastor of Sligo Church, Charles Scriven, preached a sermon on November 1 that was broadcast by radio. He emphasized the theological significance of Sligo's demonstrating that a multiethnic community can flourish, but warned that the diversity of membership was a fragile treasure. Seventh-day Adventist community life in Takoma Park could be irreversibly threatened

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by a move of the General Conference and its hundreds of staff completely out of the Washington metropolitan area. Why, he asked, was such a fateful decision being made without careful study into the impact on the existing institutions presently supporting the General Conference staff—not only churches, but also two Adventist elementary schools and Takoma Academy?

Pastor Scriven, to the amazement of members listening to a discussion of sensitive denominational matters by radio and in church, announced that the Sligo Church board had decided this was a matter of overriding concern to the churches in the Washington metropolitan area and was therefore inviting all interested Adventists to attend an open meeting the following Sabbath afternoon, November 8, to discuss the move of the General Conference headquarters. He encouraged as many Adventists from as many churches as possible to attend the meeting.

After careful guidelines had been agreed to and Potomac Conference President Ralph Martin had been chosen as chairman, Neal Wilson consented to attend. Sabbath afternoon, November 8, some

500 people gathered in the main sanctuary of Sligo Church. Scriven took the initial 10 minutes allotted to him to summarize his concerns. Surely, wise planning would require considering the impact the move would have on school enrollment (i.e., the loss of students to John Nevins Andrews and Sligo Elementary schools and to Takoma Academy). There would also be the costs of building new schools and churches near the homes of the staff that would inevitably leave Washington to cluster around the General Conference building. The total financial burden of moving the General Conference could become so high that Adventist givers would become increasingly demoralized and local Takoma Park SDA congregations become financially drained.

In the 30 minutes provided to the General Conference president, Wilson for the first time publicly confirmed that the church was looking at other sites, specifically a “high-tech” park known as Columbia Gateway on Route I-95 in Howard County, and the Review and Herald campus at Hagerstown. He conceded that no impact studies had been undertaken to assess the long-term costs of abandoning the nearby Montgomery County site and moving further away.

Since he knew that many still wondered why the General Conference should spend several millions to move at all, Wilson listed several reasons, among them:

- Some foreign governments assumed the church had ties to the United States Government since both had their headquarters in the same metropolitan area. Moving out of the District of Columbia would lessen that impression. Indeed, some urged that the denomination’s headquarters should move out of North America entirely.

- The fact that headquarters offices are scattered in several buildings across narrow and heavily trafficked streets undermined the achievement of team spirit. Productivity was reduced. Indeed, it was fortunate that with all the traffic no staff had been killed in an accident.

- Operating savings at a new site were expected to reach up to \$500,000 a year. In a single, new building, located in a less urban setting, efficien-

cies could be achieved in energy, maintenance, and security. In addition, moving that part of the General Conference complex from the District of Columbia line would permit avoiding payment of the District’s high workmen’s compensation fees.

After two hours of discussion, Martin adjourned the meeting. That same week a group of local lay leaders, pastors, and school principals were convened by Martin to discuss local church strategies for coping with the impact of the move out of Takoma Park. Preliminary estimates put loss of elementary and secondary students at existing Adventist schools in Takoma Park as high as 100. Strong sentiment was expressed among this group of local denominational leaders that the least expensive approach would be to buy back the existing headquarters complex in Takoma Park. The General Conference could either expand into the existing Review and Herald building (doubling the General Conference’s office space), or construct a new building on open land opposite the existing high-rise. The sale of property elsewhere, owned by the General Conference, could help pay for the construction.

However, recognition of the practical difficulties involved in persuading denominational leaders to repurchase the existing headquarters (and persuading the developers to sell it back to the church) convinced the group to focus on urging the General Conference to remain committed to the Montgomery County property on the Route 29 corridor. Within four days of the public meeting in Sligo Church, Martin, as Potomac Conference president and chairman of the ad hoc committee, wrote to Wilson:

If Montgomery County is not willing to give a satisfactory proposal on the Highway 29 property, we are ready to mount a citizens campaign to help them realize the detrimental consequences to the County of their decision. We represent about 8,000 voting constituents and have begun to pull together some excellent arguments as to why it is in their interest to assist in this move. We believe that we can add a factor that has not been there before.

Wilson wrote back within the week, discouraging such activism.

We would hesitate to encourage you, or any of our dear

people here, to try and put undue pressure on Montgomery County authorities. We have had candid discussions with them. They have been very kind in listening and trying to find solutions. We would be very unhappy if other groups began to put pressure on them which might appear as though we were begging; and it could ultimately create an atmosphere of alienation. There have even been some serious questions raised as to church/state implications if they did something special, unusual, and preferential for the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Martin, Scriven, and the other local Adventist leaders acquiesced. As it had for several years, contact with Montgomery County officials remained in Wilson's hands.

In less than a month, on December 15, Wilson urged the General Conference officers—the vice-presidents, treasurers, and members of the secretariat—to recommend to the General Conference Committee that they abandon Montgomery County as the site for the General Conference headquarters. Surprisingly, the officers refused to go along, reportedly voting 13-11 to remain with the Montgomery County site.

Still local denominational leaders and lay persons deferred to the General Conference president and mounted no campaign with Montgomery County officials. And, on January 29, 1987, after arranging for the Rouse Company, developers of Columbia Gateway, to give a half-day presentation, Wilson got a different vote from the General Conference Committee: 58-17 in favor of relocation to Howard County. The General Conference Committee voted not to build in Montgomery County, but to construct the new General Conference in the Columbia Gateway business park, next to Highway I-95 in Howard County near Baltimore. News stories on the church's decision appeared in the *Washington Post* and other regional papers.

The County Executive Intervenes

Since the dramatic meeting at Sligo Church in November 1986, local

Adventist leaders had abided by Wilson's admonition against involvement. Only when the final decision seemed to have been made in January, did local Adventist leaders finally launch their own series of meetings with Montgomery County officials. Since Wilson had not met with County Executive Kramer after his election, Kramer was stunned by the General Conference Committee vote. He would work hard, he told the local Adventist leaders, to gain the necessary approval from the county planning board to keep the Adventist headquarters in Montgomery County. He pointed out that he had grown up in Takoma Park and always appreciated their presence. State Senator Ida Rubin, a prominent political figure in Montgomery County and Takoma Park's representative in the Maryland state legislature, also spoke out in favor of retaining the Adventist headquarters in Montgomery County.

On February 6, Kramer wrote directly to the General Conference, pledging that the county's transportation department, at his direction, would work with the denomination on a proposal designed to overcome the objections of the county planning board.

Following a meeting with Scriven, Takoma Park Mayor Stephen Del Giudice, along with the City Council, adopted, on February 12, a resolution of support for keeping the General Conference headquarters in Montgomery County. Copies of the resolution were sent to the county executive, county council, and county planning board. The action was taken despite the obvious immediate financial advantage to the City of Takoma Park if the previously untaxable Adventist church property were sold to taxable private concerns. The mayor and city council were nevertheless anxious to sustain the viability of the remaining Adventist institutions in their community.

The great imponderable during February was how the General Conference officers would respond to the new county executive's initiative. The General Conference treasurer and others continued to meet with developers of the Columbia Gateway business park. They visited with

County Executive Elizabeth Bobo of Howard County, where the business park was located. Simultaneously, Charles Frederick, coordinator of the General Conference building project, and John Delaney, the experienced Montgomery County real estate attorney retained for years by the denomination to work on the project, stretched their mandates to the breaking point. Despite the General Conference Committee's January action to abandon Montgomery County, they intensified their contacts with Montgomery County officials, focusing on plans to avoid the traffic congestion feared by the planning board. They apparently were acutely aware that during February Wilson several times reminded the General Conference officers and General Conference Committee that—despite the rumors—the General Conference was not going to build in Montgomery County.

The moment of truth came toward the end of the month. County Executive Kramer asked for a commitment from the General Conference that it would actually proceed to submit to the county planning board the plans his department of transportation officials and the General Conference attorney had worked out. Kramer promised that the county transportation officials would appear with the Seventh-day Adventists before the planning board and strongly argue for alterations in the planning board's traffic-reduction requirements, but only if the General Conference officially applied for permission to build.

At one point, after listening to the county transportation officials' vigorous arguments, the chairman noted wryly that the county executive had "pulled out all the stops on this one."

By now, Kramer had clearly informed himself of the structure and workings of the General Conference. He let it be known that since it was public knowledge that the General Conference Committee had taken an official action to move to

Howard County, for the application to be taken seriously, he felt it was imperative that the application be presented personally by the president of the General Conference at the next meeting of the Montgomery County planning board, March 5, 1987.

On March 2, the General Conference officers debated whether or not to proceed with the application. Although Wilson remained dubious, the officers voted overwhelmingly in favor of cooperating with the Montgomery County executive. It was still unclear whether the General Conference president would appear personally.

The Planning Board Decides

The afternoon of March 5, the room in which the planning board met was packed with Adventists. Many were Washington-area laypersons and pastors, along with local conference and union officials. Others came from the General Conference, including departmental directors, treasurers, and various vice-presidents. In addition, General Conference employees were released from work if they chose to attend the planning board session. On the front row, easily accessible to the denomination's attorney, sat Neal Wilson.

In the tradition of government bureaucracies, the meeting started one-half hour late. Along with Attorney Delaney and several traffic consultants retained by the church, representatives of the county executive sat at the applicants' table. For three hours they negotiated together, debating with the planning board and its staff. At one point, after listening to the county transportation officials' vigorous arguments, the chairman noted wryly that the county executive had "pulled out all the stops on this one." The wisdom of County Executive Kramer's plea that the president of the General Conference attend the hearing was borne out. Repeatedly, Attorney Delaney was able to turn to Wilson for a prompt yes or no as to whether the church could live with some compromise suggested by a member of the planning board.

The lengthy discussion ended in a consensus favorable to the church. Before the final vote, the board offered the president of the General Conference an opportunity to comment without interruption. For Wilson it must have been a bittersweet moment. He pointed out that the project was nine months behind schedule. "For some of us it has been quite a period of education, further developing our patience and helping us know how to deal more effectively with frustration . . . also it has been a graduate course in county politics." Wilson also took pains to acknowledge that the chairman had said that afternoon that the planning board wanted the Seventh-day Adventist world headquarters to remain in Montgomery County. However, he told the chairman, "we are here not because we do not have other options—we do. We are not here to beg." Indeed, although Wilson hoped that the board would approve the application,

if you, Mr. Christeller, and the Board deem our proposals totally inadequate . . . perhaps the only honorable thing for us to do is to gracefully withdraw our application rather than to see this matter concerning the world headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church become some kind of a political issue, or an ongoing column in the newspapers, or some internal misunderstanding between the county and the planning board.

After listening stony-faced to Wilson's comments, the board proceeded to vote approval of the plans submitted by the General Conference, conditional upon the signing of an agreement that stipulated measures required to mitigate traffic congestion on Route 29.

Two weeks of fine tuning by the church and its lawyers won a limitation on the church's traffic-reduction efforts from an indefinite period to 10

years, with the understanding that the church would cooperate with trip-reduction programs the county might propose at a later date. At their very next meeting the planning board approved the set of specific requirements (see box), and on April 21, 1987, the General Conference officers approved acceptance of the same document. The struggle was over.

With the General Conference headquarters at the Route 29 site, the existing network of institutions will be able to continue to serve the General Conference staff and benefit from its personnel. Local Adventist leaders were pleased with the outcome, and the fact that their insistence on being involved in denominational decision-making had paved the way for the church to build its new headquarters on the site initially selected.

Interestingly, the Montgomery County community seemed to display the greatest satisfaction at the outcome. County Executive Kramer told the *Washington Post* that Montgomery County had won an important victory. . . . "We have been in competition with Howard County for the Adventists' headquarters because it is an international headquarters, and because they have been very good neighbors."⁵ In an April 23 editorial entitled "Adventists Stay—Amen," the *Montgomery Journal* was even more expansive.

A move by the church to Howard County, as was contemplated would have meant uprooting many of the 800 workers associated with the church headquarters and would have meant the loss of one of the county's most prestigious religious and cultural institutions. . . County officials worked hard to accommodate the Adventists while requiring they take extensive measures to eliminate adverse traffic impacts. Because of the County's efforts, the Adventists may call Montgomery County home for another 82 years.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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